DOI:
10.1080/01402390.2019.1612376

Document Version
Peer reviewed version

Author's Accepted Manuscript

SO MANY BUTTERFLIES:

ISAIAH BERLIN AND THE CHALLENGE OF STRATEGY

The Journal of Strategic Studies

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author would like to thank Beatrice Heuser and two anonymous reviewers for commenting on an earlier draft of this paper.

ABSTRACT

Isaiah Berlin has not attracted much attention from academic strategists. This is unfortunate, because his concept of value pluralism helps explain why strategic decisions are burdened by uncertainty. It also highlights the importance of political judgement in reducing this uncertainty, and the role of history in educating political judgement.

KEY WORDS

Berlin Clausewitz Strategy Judgement Pluralism History

INTRODUCTION

Strategists might be forgiven for wondering why Isaiah Berlin, that genial champion of political liberalism who abhorred physical violence, is relevant to their concerns. Of course the practical contributions of Oxford dons to national security have been many

and varied, and Berlin was no exception in this regard. During the Second World War he was posted to Washington, from which vantage point he kept his superiors well-briefed on developments in the US political scene. Here, however, I am less interested in Berlin's war record than in the relevance of his intellectual concerns to questions of strategy. This happens to be considerable although not widely recognized. Lawrence Freedman has noted the pertinence of Berlin's views on political judgement to matters of strategic deliberation.[1] Nevertheless, there remains more to be said in this respect. More specifically I propose to demonstrate: a) that Berlin's notion of political judgement is part of a broader intellectual vision that relates the concrete specifics of strategic practice to their underlying social contexts; and b) that the political utility of strategic decisions rests on how well these contexts are understood. To this end I provide an account of Berlin's views on history and politics, with particular reference to his concept of value pluralism. I then recruit Clausewitz in order to clarify how value pluralism burdens strategic deliberation with uncertainty, and how political judgement can ameliorate the resulting problems. Because concrete details are central to such matters, I subsequently discuss some important historical instances of the role played by political judgement in shaping strategy. These examples are not intended to reveal anything empirically new. Rather, their purpose is to illuminate the manner in which political judgement influences decisions about the scale and scope of military effort. Finally, I conclude with some brief remarks about the value of history to strategists.

1. Lawrence Freedman, *Strategy: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), esp. 613-4. Additionally, some aspects of this present article are more briefly sketched out in John Stone, *Military Strategy: The Politics and Technique of War* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

Berlin (1909-97) was born in Riga, which was then part of the Russian Empire.[2] In the wake of the Revolution his family emigrated to England, which provided him with a congenial new home. As an undergraduate he went up to Oxford where he subsequently spent the rest of his academic life. He initially taught analytic philosophy but, on returning after the war, focused more on the history of ideas. That said, Berlin is difficult to pigeonhole. His interests included politics, ethics and music; he was reluctant to describe himself as a historian, and the influence of his philosophical views remained readily apparent in his other pursuits. This eclecticism, compounded with Berlin's suspicion of organized systems of thought, left scope for questioning the defining character of his contribution to intellectual life.[3] Today he is probably best known for his distinction between positive and negative liberty, and for his division of people into hedgehogs (who view the world through the lens of a single organizing idea) and foxes (who perceive matters in terms of many unrelated facts). As will become clear, however, these are elements of a wider intellectual effort to defend a role for freedom and choice in human affairs against the manifold influence of monism.

Berlin's views on these issues were underpinned by what John Gray terms his value pluralism, and the radical challenge it poses to the prescriptive status of political philosophy.[4] According to Berlin this status is predicated on

2. Berlin's long and interesting times are documented in Michael Ignatieff, *Isaiah Berlin: A Life* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1998).

3. Indeed the fact that Berlin never produced a major work of synthesis led some to question his intellectual significance. Such doubts have since been dispelled, not least by Henry Hardy's edited collections of Berlin's essays. In what follows I have drawn on: Henry Hardy, ed., *The Sense of Reality: Studies in Ideas and their History* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1996) [hereafter *SR*]; Henry Hardy and Roger Hausheer, eds, *The Proper Study of Mankind: An Anthology of Essays* (London: Pimlico, 1998) [hereafter *PSM*]; Henry Hardy, ed., *Against the Current: Essays in the History of Ideas* (Princeton University Press, 2013) [hereafter *AC*].

4. John Gray, *Isaiah Berlin* (London: HarperCollins, 1995).

> the conviction that there exist true, immutable, universal, timeless, objective values, valid for all men, everywhere, at all times; that these values are at least in principle realisable, whether or not human beings are, or have been, or ever will be, capable of realising them on earth; that these values form a coherent system, a harmony which, conceived in social terms, constitutes the perfect state of society…[5]

This conviction implies a commitment to rationalism, to the assumption that a perfect society is (again if only in principle) attainable via the exercise of reason. Someone of sufficient intellectual stature should, in other words, be able to resolve the apparent tensions we routinely discern between values such as freedom and equality, or justice and mercy, thereby reducing them to some harmonious whole. Indeed, Berlin claimed that just such a monist conception of the good had always been the ultimate goal of Western philosophy.[6]

The significance of Berlin's value pluralism lies in its rejection of such rationalist assumptions. In this he was influenced by many different sources. From Machiavelli came the insight that different moralities are not reconcilable—that the pagan values of Republican Rome were incompatible with Christian values, and that those aspiring to temporal power had consequently to privilege political glory in this life over spiritual salvation in the next.[7] Berlin was likewise impressed by Giambattista Vico's point that past civilizations have bequeathed us great achievements we cannot hope to emulate. This is because our worldviews are so dissimilar that, despite our own impressive scientific and technological accomplishments, we could not today create anything like

5. "Vico and the Ideal of Enlightenment", *AC*, 152.

6. "The Pursuit of the Ideal", *PSM*, 6.

7. "The Originality of Machiavelli", *PSM*, 269-325.

the *Iliad* or *Odyssey*. Consequently there can be no common basis for comparisons between our respective achievements.[8] And from Herder came the Romantic movement's assertion that cultural particularism is constitutive of human flourishing, that the Enlightenment emphasis on remaking society along rational lines dooms humankind to an impoverishing, deracinated existence.[9]

All this led Berlin to conclude that ultimate values, though finite in number, are very diverse and cannot necessarily be reconciled with each other. Consequently the tensions we have always perceived between them are not only artefacts of our intellectual shortcomings: they are also symptomatic of radical incompatibilities that admit of no rational solution. Reason may serve to hone our appreciation of these incompatibilities, and the dilemmas they create for us, but it cannot otherwise help us resolve them. There is, in other words, no exclusively best way of living awaiting our discovery.[10] To claim otherwise—to base society on some monistic conception of the good—would be to deny the legitimacy of alternative views.[11] Indeed, monism can all too readily inspire utopian visions demanding the suppression of dissent amongst those who cannot appreciate what is best for them. These become the totalitarian projects of Berlin's hedgehogs: of Robespierre, Hitler, and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, "who relate everything to a single, universal, organising principle … a fanatical, unitary inner vision" providing a procrustean standard against which to measure all thought and action.[12]

8. "Vico and the Ideal of Enlightenment", 151-63;

9. "Herder and the Enlightenment", *PSM*, 359-435.

10. "The Pursuit of the Ideal", 1-16.

11. "Two Concepts of Liberty", *PSM*, 191-242.

12. *PSM*, 436-7. "Trust us to lead because we know what is better for you and the umma" is a popular refrain within jihadi circles according to Fawaz A. Gerges, *The Far Enemy: Why Jihad Went Global*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 38.

Here it might be observed that, in attempting to save us from totalitarianism, Berlin acceded to an alternative tragedy: a world characterized by unavoidable disagreement and conflict over values. In such a world we would have to accept that reason could provide no safeguard against war, and that some wars would be terrible indeed if fought between societies whose lack of common values precluded mutual understanding. Berlin believed that such outcomes were unlikely, however. He considered that the number of fundamental values is finite, and that the manner of their combination is what is unique to any particular society. Moreover, even when confronted with values that we do not share, we can nevertheless appreciate the role they play in shaping the deliberations of others. Condemnation does not preclude comprehension. Indeed, people "of one culture can, by the force of imaginative insight, understand … the values, the ideals, the forms of life of another culture or society, even those remote in space and time".[13]

HISTORICAL AND POLITICAL JUDGEMENT

Berlin was confident in his claims for imaginative insight because he considered it something that competent historians routinely employ in their efforts to re-create the past. History requires such efforts because its unfolding reflects the unique combinations of values held by those who enact it. In this respect his views on history, as on society, were predicated on his pluralism. Just as we should not expect reason to resolve the tensions between inherently incompatible values, he maintained, nor should we expect it to discern meaningful regularities within the flow of historical events. He therefore rejected the view that historians should aspire to the status of scientists. Their

13. "The Pursuit of the Ideal", 9. See also Ramin Jahanbegloo, *Conversations with Isaiah Berlin* (London: Peter Halban, 1992), 36-7.

task could not be to identify reductive correlations between data points, because the significance of such points depends on the unique constellation of values associated with the society under consideration. Consequently any such internal world of values cannot be analysed effectively from the outside, and attempts to do so will inevitably fall into anachronism. Instead, historians must enter this internal world by imaginatively reconstructing it; for only then can they appreciate the historical significance of the data under consideration.[14]

But although historical events defy reduction to some universal objective pattern, nor are they entirely random. As Berlin noted, we typically perceive them as constituents of some larger stream that flows in a particular direction; we allow that certain things could only have happened at certain points in that stream and not others; we look back at utopian schemes, realizable only through impossible efforts to defy the realities of their day, and we distinguish such schemes from those that succeeded because of astute accommodation with the tide of events. In re-creating the past, therefore, historians must strike a balance between two equally unsatisfactory extremes: they must avoid overly reductive generalizations, just as they must avoid interpreting their data without regard to the constraints of context.

> Historians [wrote Berlin] cannot ply their trade without a considerable capacity for thinking in general terms; but they need, in addition, peculiar attributes of their own: a capacity for integration, for perceiving qualitative similarities and differences, a sense of the unique fashion in which various factors combine in the particular concrete situation, which must at once be neither so unlike any other situation as to constitute a total break with the continuous flow of human

14. "The Concept of Scientific History", *PSM*, 17-58.

> experience, nor yet so stylised and uniform as to be the obvious creature of theory and not made of flesh and blood.[15]

It was this sense of the plausible that Berlin termed historical judgement.

Berlin's account of history is incompatible with claims that it provides a repository of timeless lessons for those possessing the key to unlock them. There could be no such key, because there is no genuinely universal history. However, he did observe that historical judgement has an instrumental counterpart in the realm of politics, that successful statecraft rests on sound political judgement. In this respect the difference between historical and political judgement is one of temporal orientation and purpose. Whereas historians seek to understand the past for understanding's sake, statesmen seek to understand the present for the purposes of shaping the future. Both, however, are operating on their data in a similar manner. Much like its historical counterpart, political judgement involves

> a capacity for integrating a vast amalgam of constantly changing, multicoloured, evanescent, perpetually overlapping data, too many, too swift, too intermingled to be caught and pinned down and labelled like so many individual butterflies. To integrate in this sense is to see the data … as elements in a single pattern, with their implications, to see them as symptoms of past and future possibilities, to see them pragmatically—that is, in terms of what you or others can or will do to them, and what they can and will do to others or to you.[16]

This capacity, moreover, works without recourse to the strictures and limitations of formal intellectual systems. Instead it is common sense developed to some

15. Ibid., 56.

16. "Political Judgement", *SR*, 46.

conspicuously high degree, although it might sometimes manifest as uncanny luck.[17] In this way are those gifted with sound judgement able to navigate successfully amongst the flow of events, and even shape them when it seems feasible and desirable to do so.

STRATEGY

How, then, is the foregoing relevant to the concerns of strategists? The answer depends, of course, on what we consider strategy to be, and there is room for interpretation in this respect. What follows, therefore, is based on the view that strategy provides the link between military means and political ends; that it is concerned with the use of armed force to achieve intended political effects. This is a mainstream understanding of strategy.[18] Moreover, it is one that permits the role played by political judgement in its operation to be specified with the help of Clausewitz.

According to Clausewitz, wars are fought between belligerents that are each seeking to achieve their political goals at least probable cost. From a military perspective, this situation pushes both sides into extreme efforts intended to minimize the threat posed by their enemy. Absent other considerations, this will involve each side seeking to destroy the other's armed forces as rapidly as possible, by means of the most powerful blows they can manage. Settling for some lesser effort would serve only to increase the risk of disarmament by an enemy that observes no comparable restraint. That said, it is frequently the case that both sides would prefer to restrict the scale and scope of their military efforts, and resolve their differences at some lower level of violence. Wars in which both sides endeavour to disarm each other typically involve much costly fighting.

17. "The Sense of Reality", *SR*, 25; "Political Judgement", 53.

18. For variations on this theme see: Colin S. Gray, *The Future of Strategy* (Cambridge: Polity, 2015), 21; B. H. Liddell Hart, *Strategy: The Indirect Approach* (London: Faber and Faber, 1967), 335; Peter Paret, "Introduction", in *Makers of Modern Strategy: from Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age*, ed. Peter Paret (Oxford: Clarendon, 1986), 3.

Thus, unless the belligerents attach extraordinary importance to achieving their political goals, they will likely find that the costs of war outweigh the benefits. In the case of wars fought over relatively modest political differences, therefore, each side will wish to restrain its own efforts, and will be correspondingly alert to signs that its adversary does too. Consequently such wars are often fought to a partial military conclusion within the context of mutually observed limitations on the use of force. This indeed is what Clausewitz had in mind when he characterized war as a continuation of politics. It is not simply that war proceeds from political differences, but that the values attached to these differences constrain its conduct by setting limits on what each side is willing to sacrifice.[19]

Fundamentally, therefore, strategy involves striking a balance between the military and political imperatives of war. One must venture enough to avoid military defeat, but not so much that the costs of fighting outweigh the political benefits of victory.[20] This, however, can become very difficult once theoretical generalities give way to concrete instances of war—and the reasons for this are readily explicable in terms of Berlin's value pluralism. Because each war arises from unique political circumstances, strategists must look to the specifics of each case in order to establish how much scope they possess for departing from their maximum military effort. Following Berlin, there can be no mechanical procedure for doing this, no algorithm with which to manipulate the relevant data, even if what count as relevant data could be unequivocally established. This is because the questions strategists must answer relate to an enemy's intentions, to what he is proposing to do with his armed forces. These intentions are governed by his

19. Carl von Clausewitz, *Vom Kriege*, ed. Werner Halweg, 19th ed. (Bonn: Dümmler, 1980), 191-213.

20. Ibid, 347.

resolve, by the costs and risks he is willing to bear in pursuit of his political goals. And his resolve depends, in its turn, on the extent to which his political goals embody his ultimate values. Moreover, the unique constellation of competing values that finds its expression in any given society will not be fully appreciated by its own members, let alone their adversaries in other societies. A specific political dispute will harness some combination of these values to the conduct of war, galvanizing resolve in each belligerent that the other cannot readily anticipate. It is therefore necessary for strategists on both sides to assemble pertinent insights from the wealth of accompanying data that is potentially relevant to the specific situation; to discern amongst it an underlying pattern that discloses something of an enemy's intentions and their likely interactions with their own. Clausewitz was alluding to the same matters when he noted that

> the first, the greatest, the most decisive act of judgement that the statesman and commander perform is that of correctly recognizing, in this respect, the war on which they are embarking. They must neither mistake it for something, nor wish to change it into something, that is contrary to the nature of its circumstances. This is, then, the first and most comprehensive of all strategic questions ... [21]

Here Berlin might have added that this question cannot be definitively answered, that one must continually return to it in the light of changing circumstances.

BISMARCK AND GERMAN UNIFICATION

Because Berlin's understanding of judgement is associated with the ability to integrate specific details under concrete circumstances, historical illustrations provide a valuable

21. Ibid., 212.

way of illuminating its relationship with strategy. Consequently, I now turn to the influence of Otto von Bismarck over Prussian strategy during the wars of German unification. The choice is not an arbitrary one: Berlin considered Prussia's prime minister to be the consummate political actor—"perhaps the most effective of all nineteenth-century statesmen."[22] And this, he considered, was because Bismarck possessed a striking ability to construct accurate political assessments from a multiplicity of relevant data. From a strategic perspective this ability proved particularly important, because it furnished him with a sound understanding of the wars he required Prussia to fight, and what this implied for the conduct of military operations.

Bismarck was that contradictory thing: a conservative revolutionary. His principal goal was to preserve the Hohenzollern dynasty from the threat posed by liberal nationalism in mid-century Germany. His bold solution lay not in seeking to suppress nationalist sentiment, but in appropriating it to the conservative cause. This he sought to achieve by placing Wilhelm I of Prussia at the head of a new *Reich* assembled from the existing collection of German states.[23] In this respect the challenge facing Bismarck was to generate the national sentiment necessary for German unification, whilst neutralizing sources of resistance to this goal. His ultimate success in this endeavour stemmed from his ability to navigate a path to unification amongst the complex political realities of his day.

According to Berlin, Bismarck's grasp of these realities did not result from privileged access to some timeless laws of political life; he did not view the world in accordance with some objective standard of rationality.[24] To be sure, he appreciated certain general

22. "Political Judgement", 49.

23. For a recent overview of Bismarck's career see Edgar Feuchtwanger, *Bismarck: A Political History*, 2nd ed. (Routledge, 2014).

24. "The Sense of Reality", *SR*, 37.

propositions about the political climate of his times: he knew his project would inevitably provoke resistance from other European powers, and that Prussia therefore needed the military strength necessary to impose its will as required. This was partly a technical challenge for the army, but in an age of mass politics it also involved creating popular support for military initiatives. It was evident to Bismarck

> that the only way to fight power is by power: and power in the modern world requires the organisation of as many human beings as is practicable, and the employment by them or on their behalf of the only instruments capable of crushing resistance—political and military measures. If the institutions and the force of the enemy were to be overcome, it could be done only by the conquest of political power; the enemy could be finally crushed only by an act of coercion, by revolution.[25]

But in addition to this general sense of nineteenth-century political realities, Bismarck enjoyed a penetrating insight into relevant specifics. At each step of the way he appreciated enough of the concrete circumstances confronting him to intuit what needed to be done, and how he might achieve it. And although Bismarck was not infallible in such matters, his strategic prescriptions did offer better prospects for political success than the formulaic alternatives presented by the military.

For its part the Prussian army was both an immense help and a considerable hindrance to Bismarck. At its head stood the highly talented Helmuth von Moltke, who was perhaps the best general of his age. He did, however, hold decidedly fixed views about the relationship between war and politics, which resulted in an inflexible conception of strategy. Moltke had risen to power amongst senior officers who had

25. "Marxism in the Nineteenth Century", *SR*, 134.

experienced disaster at the hands of Napoleon I. In 1806 the Emperor of the French had effectively crushed Prussian military resistance at Jena. In the ensuing peace Prussia lost half its territory, and narrowly avoided complete dismemberment. As the army reconstituted itself in the wake of defeat, it determined never to fall victim to another such disaster and assiduously prepared to inflict something similar on its future enemies instead. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that Moltke's appreciation of strategy faithfully echoed these sentiments. Although he declared himself intellectually indebted to Clausewitz, and acknowledged that war proceeds from political differences between states, Moltke insisted that the goal of military operations should always be the destruction of the enemy army through battle.[26] His conception of strategy was, in other words, much narrower than the interplay of military and political imperatives that had concerned Clausewitz.

Thus whatever Moltke's professional qualifications for high command, he was working on a smaller canvas than Bismarck, whose concerns lay with the wider political consequences of military action. In the event, therefore, these two different perspectives collided during Prussia's wars with Austria and France. Indeed, in each case, Bismarck faced a Clausewitzian moment—one in which the formulation of sound strategy demanded the subordination of military imperatives to contrary political considerations.

In the first instance Bismarck precipitated war with Austria in order to humble Vienna, thereby excluding her from political developments in the rest of Germany. He

26. See his 1871 essay "Ueber Strategie" in *Moltkes Militärische Werke* 2/2 (Berlin: Ernst Siegfried Mittler und Sohn, 1900) 291-3. Also: Hajo Holborn, "The Prusso-German School: Moltke and the Rise of the General Staff", in Paret, ed., 281-95; Gunther E. Rothenberg, "Moltke, Schlieffen, and the Doctrine of Strategic Envelopment", in Paret, ed., 296-325; Gerhard Ritter, *The Sword and the Scepter: The Problem of Militarism in Germany*, Volume I: *The Prussian Tradition 1740-1890*, trans. Heinz Norden (Coral Gables, FL: University of Miami Press, 1969), 194-206.

also reckoned on making territorial gains in northern Germany that would furnish Prussia with several million new subjects. As for Austria itself, however, he determined against annexations in an effort to keep hostilities brief, and mend relations as soon as possible thereafter.

On 3 July 1866 Moltke hammered the Austrian army at Königgrätz and sent it reeling back on Vienna.[27] True to his doctrines, he next intended a swift follow-up calculated to destroy the remaining Austrian forces before they regained their balance. Any delay, he reasoned, would introduce unnecessary risks into a currently favourable military situation.[28] At this point, however, political considerations intruded in the form of Napoleon III, who stepped into the fray with an offer to broker peace between Berlin and Vienna.[29] This was not something to be lightly dismissed, because any affront to the emperor's honour risked war with France whilst the Prussian army was yet committed in Bohemia.

Thus Bismarck now faced a dilemma. Moltke remained sanguine at the prospect of a two-front war, but the prime minister had no wish to see Vienna and Paris become allies in consequence—not least because he was planning to fight France in the foreseeable future. An armistice was therefore desirable sooner rather than later. Nevertheless, it was risky to suspend military operations in the absence of prior French acquiescence in Bismarck's political goals with respect to Austria. If subsequent negotiations failed to

27. For details see Gordon A. Craig, *The Battle of Königgrätz* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1965).

28. Gordon A. Craig, *The Politics of the Prussian Army, 1640-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956), 198, 202.

29. Otto Fürst von Bismarck, *Gedanken und Erinnerungen*, Zweiter Band (Stuttgart: Verlag der J. G. Cotta'schen Buchhandlung Nachfolger, 1898), 57.

deliver on these, hostilities would have to be renewed under less favourable military conditions.[30] What, then, was to be done?

In the event Bismarck guessed that Napoleon would ultimately consent to his relatively modest terms for peace with Austria, and trusted that diplomacy would deliver them in due course.[31] Meanwhile he set himself to resisting the army's plans for an immediate renewal of offensive operations. This required a sustained effort on his part, not least because the king proved sympathetic to the army's position. Wilhelm was now beguiled by the prospect of extensive territorial gains, and therefore looked favourably on a continuation of hostilities. It was not until the night of 11/12 July that Bismarck finally received the diplomatic assurances he required from Paris and Vienna.[32] Thereafter he had still to fight his corner in the Prussian councils of war, but could do so with greater authority. What was required, in terms of Austrian concessions for his German project, could now be had without further recourse to war. Why then press for more, when doing so would jeopardize everything? Persuading the king proved difficult, and Bismarck prevailed only after the intervention of the Crown Prince. But Wilhelm did ultimately agree to his prime minister's wishes, concluding that if

> a heavy war indemnity from Austria or an acquisition of land sufficient to impress the eye … cannot be obtained from the vanquished without endangering our principal objective [i.e. unification], then the victor at the gates of Vienna must bite into this sour apple and leave to posterity the judgement of its behaviour.[33]

30. Craig, *Politics*, 201-02.

31. Ibid., 199, 201, 203.

32. Bismarck, 66.

33. Cited in Craig, *Politics*, 203. Bismarck (p. 71) remembered the wording differently, but did not have the relevant document to hand when writing his memoirs.

Bismarck's political instincts had in fact proved sound. He had correctly anticipated the mood in Paris and Vienna, and had therefore been justified in resisting calls for renewed military action in favour of negotiations. Despite Wilhelm's misgivings, therefore, the judgement of posterity ultimately favoured his prime minister's management of events.

Bismarck did later provoke war with France, but under more auspicious circumstances. He appreciated that Napoleon would not willingly tolerate a powerful new empire on his eastern border, and must therefore be allowed no choice in the matter. Hence the Franco-Prussian War, which commenced on 19 July 1870.[34] Hostilities began with a dramatic series of frontier battles orchestrated by Moltke, by means of which he destroyed the French army and bottled up its remnants in the fortified city of Metz. Napoleon was also captured in the process, and by early September Bismarck was seemingly in sight of realizing his new *Reich*.

Then matters went awry. The collapse of the regular French army heralded a new phase of the war, characterized by revolution in Paris and the emergence of a national government determined to prolong hostilities by means of popular resistance. Replacement forces were hastily assembled in the French interior, and *franc tireurs* began operating in occupied territory. What was supposed to be a short sharp war now threatened to become a struggle of indefinite duration and unpredictable consequences, as new political energies were unleashed. It was against this alarming background that Moltke and Bismarck fell out. Each entertained very different views about how best to terminate the war, and the significance of Paris to this process.

The French capital would henceforth play a central role in the war's outcome. Its symbolic importance effectively bound the new national government to its fate, even as

34. For details see: Michael Howard, *The Franco-Prussian War* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1961); Geoffrey Wawro, *The Franco-Prussian War: The German Conquest of France in 1870-1871* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

Moltke invested it in mid-September. Consequently it acted as a beacon for replacement French forces, which were tasked with raising the siege. For his part Moltke remained true to form. He was determined to strike down all opposition until the French people finally acknowledged defeat.[35] He sought to destroy their new provincial forces in the field, and answered irregular resistance with harsh reprisals. All the while he grew exasperated with a foe that remained as stubborn as it did militarily ineffective, evidently failing to realize that the French need only endure in order to create political problems for Prussia.[36] At any event, Moltke's plans for winning the war required him to re-deploy the troops investing Paris, and he therefore wished to ensure that the city's substantial French garrison would not subsequently become a threat. Consequently he stipulated that any terms for the surrender of the capital include its occupation under martial law, along with the disarmament of its garrison troops and their imprisonment in Germany.[37]

Bismarck, on the other hand, considered that more conciliatory terms offered a better chance of achieving an armistice before events span further out of control. He did not relish the prospect of prolonged fighting in the French interior because it offered no political benefits whilst creating new risks. There was no longer any real prospect of Moltke's forces suffering a major defeat. Still, the chance remained that some local reversal of fortunes would stiffen French resolve and improve their negotiating position. Moreover, further delays in securing peace threatened to rob Bismarck's wider project

35. Craig, *Politics*, 208.

36. Moltke's anger at the continuation of French resistance is evident in his correspondence with his brother Adolf. See *Letters of Field-Marshal Count Helmuth von Moltke to His Mother and His Brothers*, trans. Clara Bell and Henry W. Fischer (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1892), 190–211.

37. Craig, *Politics*, 211-2; Howard, *Franco-Prussian War*, 436.

of its political momentum, and increased the risks of intervention by other powers.[38] Thus, whereas Moltke cared little for French pride, and viewed the fate of Paris as but one link in a purely military chain of events, Bismarck now saw the city as key to a political end to the war. He therefore had no wish to impose terms on the French capital that were likely to be viewed as unduly draconian or humiliating. And this, in turn, meant that he could not allow Moltke's purely military imperatives to drive strategy at this point.

In due course Moltke and Bismarck took their respective cases to the king for a decision. This time around, Wilhelm sided with his prime minister in a notably decisive manner. Not only did he stipulate that Bismarck would be the one to negotiate an armistice, but he also ordered a dismayed Moltke to consult the prime minister on the matter of any future military operations.[39] This opened the way for Bismarck to present more modest demands on Paris, which precluded its military occupation or the imprisonment of its garrison, so as to avoid further antagonizing the French.[40] His more accommodating approach proved successful, and shortly thereafter an armistice was agreed, whose scope was subsequently enlarged to encompass the whole of a war-weary France. As for Wilhelm, he was declared Emperor at Versailles on 18 January 1871—the beneficiary of a surge in German nationalism stirred up by the war.

What, then, would Berlin have made of these matters? He would likely have viewed them as disputes between a military hedgehog and political fox. For all his undoubted talent, Moltke was basically a military technician. Everything he thought and did was subordinated to a single overriding principle—the efficient destruction of the enemy's

38. Bismarck, 122-39.

39. Craig, 213; Howard, *Franco-Prussian War*, 437-8.

40. Ritter, 225.

armed forces—without serious regard to its political consequences. Politics was something for others to worry about once he had crushed the opposition. Bismarck, on the other hand, was a decidedly vulpine statesman who looked out over wider vistas. For him, military matters were but one consideration amongst others, all of which required a degree of mutual accommodation were his political goals to be realized. "In particular", he noted, "judging when the right moment has arrived, for initiating the transition from war to peace, requires knowledge of the European situation that is not necessarily familiar to the military, and information that cannot be accessible to it."[41]

Not only did Bismarck, by dint of his office, have access to such knowledge and information, but he was especially adept at interpreting it. According to Berlin, he was endowed with the "power of integrating or synthesising the fleeting, broken, infinitely various wisps and fragments that make up life". Consequently he "understood the potential reactions of relevant bodies of Germans or Frenchmen or Italians or Russians", and could therefore correctly anticipate how events would unfold.[42] All successful statesmen, claimed Berlin, are capable of something like this, but Bismarck managed it "over a much larger field, against a wider horizon of possible courses of action, with far greater power—to a degree, in fact, which is quite correctly described as that of genius."[43] Bismarck, in other words, possessed excellent political judgement, and was thereby able to exercise a highly beneficial influence over Prussian strategy.

THE BUSH ADMINISTRATION AND IRAQ

41. Bismarck, 120-21.

42. "Political Judgement", 49.

43. Ibid., 47-8. He receives similar praise in Ritter, 242, 249.

With the foregoing comments in mind, it is interesting to consider what Berlin would have made of recent US adventures in the Middle East. We can, of course, only speculate in this regard. Still, it seems likely that he would have looked to the fundamental assumptions that set the terms of strategic engagement in the War on Terror; and there he would have found something very different from the astute sense of the plausible that had governed Bismarck's efforts. In its place he would have discovered an uncritical belief in a deterministic account of historical progress that blinkered policy and strategy towards Iraq. This account depicted the twin doctrines of political and economic liberalism as inevitable victors over contrary ideological positions. Having emerged triumphant from the Cold War, they were now expected to deliver a bright future for all those willing and able to embrace them. During the 2000 presidential race, George W. Bush's soon-to-be national security adviser was clear on these matters. Condoleezza Rice conjured visions of an increasingly globalized world that was resolutely marching "towards markets and democracy", thereby benefitting the United States and its allies who were "on the right side of history" in this respect.[44] Bush himself subsequently claimed that the ideological conflicts of the previous century had "ended with a decisive victory for the forces of freedom—and a single sustainable model for national success: freedom, democracy, and free enterprise".[45]

There is an echo of Francis Fukuyama's claims for the end of Hegelian history here, although not a particularly faithful one. Fukuyama was at pains to deny simplistic links between his world-historical thesis and the more quotidian round of foreign-policy

44. Condoleezza Rice, "Campaign 2000: Promoting the National Interest", *Foreign Affairs* 79/1 (2000): 46, 60-61.

45. See Bush's prefatory letter of transmission to "The National Security Strategy of the United States of America" (17 September 2002).

concerns that would likely demand Washington's attention after the Cold War.[46] That political and economic freedoms were prevailing at a global level did not necessarily mean that local obstacles to their realization would prove insignificant in the meantime. Uncritical belief in the redemptive qualities of markets and democracy was not, therefore, a self-evidently sound basis for policy and strategy in the wake of al-Qaeda's attacks on the United States. It yet needed to be alloyed with an accurate grasp of local specifics.

In the near term, US forces struck back hard at al-Qaeda in order to blunt its capacity for further mischief. Still, such actions were viewed as addressing the symptoms of a deeper problem whose resolution required more ambitious solutions. More specifically, the ultimate eradication of militant jihadism was considered to require wider efforts, calculated to ameliorate the sources of popular discontent on which it evidently thrived. The Bush administration believed that this discontent stemmed from the failure of authoritarian regimes to provide their citizens with political representation and access to the global economy. This was hardly an original diagnosis. New, however, was a willingness to employ force in order to sweep away barriers to social justice in the Middle East. And it was in this context that Washington determined to remove Saddam Hussein from power in Iraq. Doing so was expected to free Iraqi citizens to embrace democracy and markets, in the process galvanizing similar events in neighbouring states and transforming the region's political and economic climate.[47] That the likes of al-Qaeda would lose traction under these conditions was but one desirable outcome of such events.

46. Francis Fukuyama, "The End of History?" *The National Interest* 16 (1989): 3-18.

47. Toby Dodge, "The Ideological Roots of Failure: The Application of Kinetic Neo-Liberalism to Iraq", *International Affairs* 86/6 (2010): 1269-86; Edward Rhodes, "The Imperial Logic of Bush's Liberal Agenda" *Survival* 45/1 (2003), 131-54.

This was an ambitious project that attracted its fair share of critics.[48] For present purposes the relevant point of contention was intimately bound up with Clausewitz's "decisive act of judgement that the statesman and commander perform", which is to appreciate the kind of war they are proposing to fight. And on this matter US politicians and generals disagreed. Disarming Saddam was a necessary precondition for removing him from power. The real question was whether the war's character would be defined by this task alone, or also by the requirement to maintain political stability thereafter. This was because the answer would determine the scale and scope of the military effort required.

The Bush administration was confident that a limited military commitment would suffice. It anticipated a short war, followed by a smooth political transition that would keep existing state institutions in place. "The idea that it's going to be a long, long, long battle of some kind I think is belied by the fact of what happened in 1990"[49] claimed defence secretary Donald Rumsfeld, evidently comparing the liberation of Kuwait with regime change in Iraq. The military was therefore directed to plan for a modest deployment, calculated to destroy Iraq's indifferent armed forces prior to withdrawing as soon as possible thereafter. For their part, the generals took a more cautious line. There were concerns about how stable a post-Saddam Iraq would really be, and whether substantially larger US forces might not be required to preserve order in the war's aftermath. [50] The details were necessarily thrashed out behind closed doors. Nevertheless, an indication of the different viewpoints emerged in February 2003 when

48. See note 55.

49 . John Easterbrook, "Rumsfeld: It Would Be A Short War", CBS, 15 November 2002, https://www.cbsnews.com/news/rumsfeld-it-would-be-a-short-war/ (accessed May 2018).

50. For details see Michael Gordon and Bernard Trainor, *Cobra II: The Inside Story of the Invasion and Occupation of Iraq* (London: Atlantic Books, 2006).

the US Army's chief of staff, General Eric Shinseki, informed the Senate Armed Services Committee that "something on the order of several hundred thousand soldiers" would likely be required to maintain stability and manage potential ethnic tensions following the invasion of Iraq. This soon drew a response from deputy defence secretary Paul Wolfowitz, who dismissed such notions as "wildly off the mark." It was difficult, he continued, "to conceive that it would take more forces to provide stability in post-Saddam Iraq than it would take to conduct the war itself and to secure the surrender of Saddam's security forces and his army—hard to imagine."[51]

One reason the administration found such an outcome unlikely was its assumption that US efforts to remake Iraq would have history on their side, and could therefore be expected to succeed with relative ease. Given the choice, Iraqi citizens would readily embrace the blessings of liberal capitalism because markets and democracy enjoy universal validity—and consequently their virtues must necessarily be self-evident to anyone capable of rational deliberation. Bush exemplified this way of thinking when he claimed that "[m]oral truth is the same in every culture, in every time, and in every place" and that markets and democracy are "right and true for every person in every society".[52] The key thing, therefore, was to remove the barriers preventing Iraqis from acting in accordance with the dictates of reason. As Toby Dodge observed, when Bush "talked about his 'inviolate … faith in the transformative power of freedom', he was referring to

51. The relevant texts are excerpted in Thomas R. Mockaitis, *The Iraq War: A Documentary and Reference Guide* (Greenwood: Santa Barbara, CA, 2012), 103-4. In the event some 150,000 troops were committed to Iraq in 2003. Numbers subsequently fluctuated, reaching a peak of 171,000 in 2007 before declining thereafter. "Troop Numbers: Foreign Soldiers in Iraq", *al Jazeera*, 14 December 2011, https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/spotlight/iraqschallenge/2011/06/201162864733970544.html (accessed October 2018).

52. "President Bush Delivers Graduation Speech at West Point" 1 June 2002, https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2002/06/20020601-3.html (accessed May 2018); Bush "National Security Strategy".

the power of individuals once liberated from oppressive regimes to use their rationality."[53] Consequently, in the case of Iraq, it would suffice merely to depose Saddam, whereupon *Homo Economicus* would step up and take over.[54]

Here, in other words, Berlin would likely have detected the influence of monism at play. Iraq would be the latest step in a determinate historical process, leading to the ultimate triumph of liberal capitalism founded on the free expression of universal reason. And yet, behind all the confident assertions of a single route to human flourishing lay an erinaceous neglect of local values and circumstances. To the likes of Bush it might seem obvious that Iraq's redemption lay in its citizens' obedience to the dictates of market and ballot-box. But could this be true of a state where economic opportunity had hitherto turned on loyalty to Saddam, and where democracy would now empower the previously downtrodden Shia majority at the expense of a privileged Sunni minority? How smoothly could the transition to self-rule really be expected to proceed under circumstances in which Iraq's traditional power structure would be turned on its head? For their part, regional experts and other academics warned that the risk of events escaping control and spiralling into violence were considerable.[55]

53. Dodge, 1275, citing Bob Woodward, *The War Within: A Secret Whitehouse History, 2006-2008* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2008), 433. Bush's full sentence reads: "It's very important, though, for you to understand that I have a set of beliefs that are inviolate: faith in the transformative power of freedom and the belief that people, if just given a chance, will choose free societies."

54. Pankaj Mishra, *Age of Anger: A History of the Present* (Penguin, 2018), 47. Mishra's book is an impressive attempt to locate such assumptions within their wider intellectual history.

55. For example: Philip H. Gordon, Martin Indyk and Michael E. O'Hanlon, "Getting Serious About Iraq", *Survival* 44/3 (2002): 9-22; Charles Tripp, "After Saddam", *Survival* 44/4 (2002): 22-37. Some 33 academics in the field of International Relations took out an advertisement in the *New York Times* arguing, amongst other things, that "Even if we win easily, we have no plausible exit strategy. Iraq is a deeply divided society that the United States would have to occupy and police for many years to create a viable state." "WAR IN IRAQ IS NOT IN AMERICA'S NATIONAL INTEREST", *New York Times*, 26 September 2002.

However, the Bush administration's hedgehogs continued operating in what Fred Kaplan described as a "fog of moral clarity".[56]

In the event, this moral clarity was no match for recalcitrant facts on the ground, which quickly asserted their authority as the civil fabric fell apart. The fall of Baghdad triggered wide-spread looting that available US forces were too few to control. The deteriorating situation called to mind a more pessimistic political tradition than that prevalent within the White House. This much the British civil servant Emma Sky discovered, after setting out to explore the newly liberated city. There she encountered a disgruntled Iraqi who succinctly summarized the new reality for her. "This is a Hobbesian world … Hobbes, Hobbes" he declared.[57] People were not, in other words, adjusting to the power vacuum by spontaneously embracing the norms of market behaviour. Rather, they were responding to the collapse of central authority by pre-emptively acquiring whatever resources remained available.

Viewed from this darker perspective, the prospects for stability in post-Saddam Iraq depended on the presence of more coercive power than the United States could readily bring to bear, because the requisite troops were not available in theatre. At this juncture, any action that further reduced the means available for maintaining order might therefore be described as fanciful. And yet the first official acts of the Coalition Provisional Authority effectively did just this. Ba'athists were peremptorily removed from senior positions in the state bureaucracy, and the rump Iraqi army was disbanded.[58] The belief that such initiatives would further reduce obstacles to Iraqi

56 . Fred Kaplan, *Daydream Believers: How a Few Grand Ideas Wrecked American Power* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2008).

57. Emma Sky, *The Unravelling: High Hopes and Missed Opportunities in Iraq* (London: Atlantic Books, 2015), 13.

58. Mockaitis, 211-14.

citizens acting in accordance with the universal dictates of rationality seemingly remained strong in the face of growing evidence to the contrary.[59] Meanwhile, the conflict quickly escalated as other actors were pulled, or jumped, into the fray with consequences that soon mocked the optimistic assumptions of the Bush administration, and that are still being felt today.

The decision to keep force levels low, and subsequently to dismantle key elements of the Iraqi state, were, in other words, responses to two important Clausewitzian moments faced by the Bush administration. They each required an accurate assessment of the type of war Iraq's would-be liberators should expect to fight. This, in turn, required the kind of judgement that Bismarck had so conspicuously possessed. There was a need to look beyond global trends, to perceive the data relevant to specific local circumstances, and to synthesize them into a faithful and coherent picture of matters on the ground. But whereas Bismarck had managed such challenges readily enough, the Bush administration did not do so.[60] For his part, Berlin would most likely have put this down to a surfeit of utopian thought, predicated on a simplistic interpretation of history.

CONCLUSIONS

Berlin is relevant to the concerns of strategists for two key reasons. One of these relates to his conception of history, which maintains a significant place for choice—and hence for politics and strategy—in human affairs. History's course is not readily set by a human hand on the tiller; indeed it can sometimes defy the most heroic of wills. But this defiance cannot be explained in terms of deterministic forces that necessarily deny

59. Dodge, 1279-81.

60. To be sure, Bismarck did not prevent the continuation of hostilities consequent on the collapse of Napoleon's regime, but he did at least succeed in retrieving the situation and ultimately gained his political goals.

choice. Human agency is not confined within boundaries defined by some rationally discernible *summum bonum*. If the currents of history prove difficult to defy, it is not (or at least not exclusively) the result of impersonal forces. Local contingency is also important in this respect. This is why historical judgement resides in the ability to re-create the past without recourse to overly reductive generalizations on the one hand, but with regard to the constraints of local context on the other. It is also why political judgement involves an appreciation of the general trend of events, combined with a sensitivity to concrete details of time and place. If politics is the art of the possible, then sound political judgement helps clarify exactly what the possible encompasses.

In the context of strategy, political judgement helps establish what the resort to force makes feasible, and at what costs and risks. In other words, the exercise of sound judgement makes strategy a genuinely political activity, as opposed to a purely military exercise in the efficient application of force. It is a difficult business, but Bismarck's exploits illustrate what is possible in this respect. His appreciation of political realities encouraged him to restrain Moltke, whose purely military view of strategy might otherwise have embroiled Prussia in larger and more intractable wars than were necessary for the purpose of German unification. In contrast, the Bush administration's efforts were a signal failure in 2003 partly because ideological certainty crowded out political judgement. There was a failure to appreciate the centrifugal political forces that removing Saddam would likely unleash, and the US military commitment was therefore kept too small to cope with the problems it subsequently faced.

Finally, the Janus-faced relationship between historical and political judgement provides direction for strategists intent on honing their sense of the plausible. Although strategy involves looking forwards into the future, it suggests that strategists should also spend a good deal of time and effort looking backwards into the past. This is not because history provides a universal road-map that can be rationally extrapolated into the future;

nor because it can be made to yield "lessons learned" of ubiquitous relevance. At least in Berlin's conception of it, history furnishes nothing reliable along these lines. Rather it is because plausible historical accounts of what previously occurred in certain specific contexts may hint, in however oblique and qualified a manner, at the possibilities for gainful action in today's version of those contexts.

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